

What is our School Culture Like?

A checklist* for evaluating a school's culture

Adapted from work by the Quality Public Education Coalition

This checklist can be used as a tool to evaluate your school's culture. Gathering the data for this audit should allow you to identify the range of cultural issues, beliefs, practices, norms, and values that prevail in your school as an initial step to evaluating how these might impact upon student learning.

The complete set of questions should allow the school community to examine all possible areas of activity. Rather than attempt everything at once, select the most relevant sections for your use. In some circumstances, it might be preferable to develop slightly different checklists for students, the board of trustees, parents, and staff. These checklists would contain only a core of questions that are common to all.

Contents:

General cultural issues
Strategy, planning, and culture
Teaching, learning, and culture
Staff issues and culture
Resourcing and culture
Community issues and culture

1. General cultural issues

What determines our school culture?

- The school's teaching and learning character
- Interpersonal relationships – whanaungatanga
- Kaupapa [policy]
- Results
- Ethical or moral "tone"
- Student attitudes and behaviour
- Official edicts
- Socio-economic status and the relative wealth of parents and community
- Ethnic character
- Is the culture unique?
- Is it at all distinctive?
- Is it consistent with other like or neighbouring schools?
- Is it OK to disagree at this school?
- Is conflict seen as an opportunity for debate?
- How important is consensus?

What visual messages are used to reinforce our school values and goals?

- Taonga [treasures, possessions]
- Memorabilia
- Crests and mottoes
- Displays
- Community presence in the school

What verbal messages are used to reinforce our school values and goals?

- Statements of aims and objectives
- Balance between the school's curriculum and the national curriculum
- Balance between vocational and academic curricula
- Style and density of written communications
- Style of oral communications
- Stories used to reinforce school values
- Heroes and heroines used to exemplify school values
- Do staff members have daily and/or weekly forums to reflect on and discuss their teaching practice?
- Rituals and ceremonies

What is our general school climate like?

- Mono-, bi-, or multicultural
- Masculine or feminine
- Student oriented
- People oriented
- Work oriented
- Procedure driven
- Outcome driven
- Process driven
- Do drive and orientation match stated values and goals?

Where does our school stand on values?

- Values neutral or values affirmed
- Values made explicit or values left implicit
- What values?
- Whose values? What is their source?
- What legitimates the school's values?
- Are values taught and/or left to be caught?
- Do the values cover: entitlements, expectations, relationships, responsibilities, rights, obligations?
- Has the school articulated positions on morality and on religion?
- Are the values appropriate for the school's goals?
- Are they communicated to and understood by everyone?
- Are they shared by everyone?
- Are they practised by everyone?

How bureaucratic is our school?

- Do goals take precedence over rules?
- Does learning take precedence over recording?
- Does learning take precedence over teaching?
- Do staff take precedence over students?
- Do family and whānau [extended family] take precedence over Ministry?

What are the sources of power in our school?

- Hierarchy
- Function
- Expertise
- Resources
- Informal status
- Control of rewards
- Control of sanctions
- Who are the key staff role models within school?
- Who are the key student role models?
- Is their behaviour appropriate and consistent with school values and goals?

How is power wielded?

- Who wields power?
- On what is their power based?
- Is power wielded through:
 - authority (law/regulation)?
 - persuasion?
 - coercion?
 - intimidation?
- Is power achieved through consensus, tātou tātou?

How important is our school's history and tradition in defining its culture?

- Has the school become stereotyped in the community?
- Is the school "tradition bound", "tradition bereft"?
- In what way are the effects beneficial or harmful?
- How does the school's tradition or history impact on neighbouring schools?
- What has been the extent of change in recent years?
- Is there a need to reduce or enhance the perceived importance of tradition?
- Does the school embody New Zealand's bi-cultural heritage?

2. Strategy, planning, and culture

Does our school know where it's going?

- Has the school defined its whole curriculum?
- Have core values been established?
- Is the mission clear?
- Is the mission expressed in clear goals and targets?
- Do students, staff, parents, governors, employers, funding bodies, business, and local community know what the school stands for?
- Are the school strategic and annual plans tangible?

How do we see ourselves as a school?

- Succeeding or failing?
- Making ground or losing it?
- Stuck or coasting?
- Stressed or relaxed?
- Proud or ashamed?
- Responsive or frustrated?
- Morally upright or overcome by circumstances?
- "Efficient" i.e., using resources (of all kinds) frugally
- "Effective" i.e., doing a really worthwhile job

Are our goals relevant in today's educational context?

- Does the school recognise external demands (of the Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, New Zealand Qualifications Authority)?
- Does the school know and accept its obligations to tangata whenua [indigenous people] under the Treaty of Waitangi?
- Are the school's strengths related to the needs of students, parents, whānau, iwi [tribe, people], and local community?
- Does the school have a strategy for prioritising and dealing with weaknesses?
- Does the school understand the risks and potential benefits associated with its existing strategies?

How is our school driven?

- By the board of trustees
- By the Ministry of Education
- By the Education Review Office (ERO)
- By outside pressure groups
- By business
- By the principal
- By issues of roll size, reputation, and results
- By all staff
- By staff pressure groups or personalities
- By students
- By parents, whānau, iwi
- By local community needs

How is planning conducted?

- By the principal
- By the board of trustees
- By parents, whānau, iwi
- By teaching teams
- By ad hoc working groups
- As directed by the Ministry of Education

What is the structure of our school?

- Formal structure
- Whole staff management
- Syndicate or department management
- Pastoral care
- Buddying
- Is there an informal status hierarchy? If so, on what is it based and by who is it valued? What specific effects does it have on the school?
- What is the extent of the gap between official policy and practice?
- Where does the board of trustees and local iwi fit into the structure?

Do the school's systems support the school's goals?

- Management and administration
- Assessment and evaluation and reporting
- Sanctions including rewards and punishments and suspension policy
- Budgeting and expenditure
- Communications
- Time-tabling
- "Special occasions"
- Teaching programmes
- Exceptional education provisions (e.g., special needs, gifted and talented, non-English speaking backgrounds [NESB])
- Image and reputation management

How does legislation affect our schools goals?

- Whose aspirations are enhanced?
- Whose aspirations are frustrated?

3. Teaching, learning, and culture

How is student learning organised?

- Using teaching and learning styles
- Classroom rules and regulations
- Classroom rewards and sanctions
- Organisation of the school day
- Student support
- Personal tutors
- Involvement of parents and whānau in student learning
- Classroom organisation
- Are economically disadvantaged students excluded from any classroom, cultural, sporting or EOTC activities?

Does the character of teaching and learning have a major influence on our school's culture?

- Are there any distinctive features in the way the school approaches learning or teaching?
- Does the school follow the national curriculum meticulously?
- Does the school incorporate taha Māori (elements of Māori language and culture) in all curriculum areas?
- Given the freedom existing in the curriculum, does the school exercise it in any distinctive way?
- Is there a tendency for teachers to be conservative in the way they teach?
- Are teachers inclined to use "radical" methods or styles?
- Is there bi-lingual or full immersion classrooms?
- Is there provision for ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and (NESB) non-English speaking background?
- If not, should these be provided
- Whatever the situation, are the board of trustees and community fully in support?

How is assessment conducted and recorded?

- Balanced between summative and formative assessment
- Diagnostic
- Personal learning profiles
- Internal moderation
- External moderation
- Internal progression and continuity

To what extent are students empowered?

- Personal records/profiles
- Choosing and planning topics
- Setting targets
- Differentiated work
- Independent/self-paced learning

- Kinesthetic learning
- Group learning
- Study skills programmes
- Praise and rewards
- Equal opportunity provisions (race, gender, disability)
- Homework club
- Breakfast club
- Interval, lunchtime, and after-school activities
- Playground environment
- Student council
- Representation on the board of trustees

4. Staff issues and culture

What are the rewards and sanctions processes for our staff?

- What is actually rewarded?
- What forms do rewards take?
- Do all staff members value rewards?
- Do rewards apply equally to all categories of staff?
- What is really punished?
- Does the existing climate promote desired school values?
- Is there equity of treatment for full-time, part-time, temporary contract, hourly-paid and relieving staff?
- Is there equity of treatment for professional, technical, paraprofessional, and support staff?
- Is there equity of treatment irrespective of status, gender, race, disability, age, religion, sexual orientation?
- What happens to dissenting staff: the "ostrich", the "heel dragger", the "conscientious objector"?
- Is the school motivated intrinsically (professionally) or extrinsically (external accountability)?
- Is it OK to make mistakes?
- Is it OK to celebrate successes?

How are staff supposed to manage?

- Who is required to communicate with whom?
- Who initiates work for whom?
- Is this appropriate in today's conditions?
- What are the official roles of people in positions of responsibility and in control of schemes of work?

How do staff actually manage?

- Who actually interacts with whom?
- What are the effects of those interactions?
- What is the actual role of people in positions of responsibility and in control of schemes of work?

How much autonomy to act exists within our school?

- Is there a policy of empowerment for:
 - parents, whānau?
 - staff?
 - students?
 - trustees, iwi?
- Is the level of empowerment consistent with stated values and goals?
- Are individuals comfortable with their level of discretion to act?

Do “champions for change” exist?

- Who are they?
- What is their level of organisational power?
- What is their degree of influence?

Who are the opinion leaders?

- What is their official status?
- What is their relative age?
- What is their gender?
- On what is their influence based?

5. Resourcing and culture

What resources are available to our school?

- Professional, technical, paraprofessional, and support staff
- Voluntary and community help
- Whānau and iwi
- External agencies (education, social welfare, business, community)
- Local, regional, and national networks
- Material resources in school
- Material resources in networks
- Equipment
- Buildings
- Grounds
- Local community

How effective are the resources?

- Does the school make full use of the resources available?
- Are existing resources adequate to support the school's intended whole curriculum?

6. Community issues and culture

How does our school interact with the community?

- What is the extent and quality of relationships with:
 - iwi
 - feeder and destination schools
 - neighbouring schools
 - the wider educational community
 - Ministry of Education, ERO, other governmental agencies
 - independent agencies
 - higher education institutions
 - early childhood centres
 - parents
 - governors
 - past students
 - prospective students
 - local community
 - local business

What does our community know about our school?

- What do parents, whānau, iwi and the wider community think about us?
- What do students think about the school?
- What do our teachers and the board of trustees think about the school?
- How efficient is the school in understanding the needs of students, parents, and the community?
- Has the school got mechanisms for distinguishing between "wants" and "needs"?

How well does the school respond to and communicate expectations?

- Are the expectations of students, parents, teachers, board of trustees, whānau, iwi, and community actually known by the school?
- Does the school accept and act on these?
- Has the school made its own expectations quite clear to those concerned?

Source: *Values in Schools - a Resource Kit*, published in 2000 by QPEC - the Quality Public Education Coalition (<http://www.qpec.org.nz>).

*The checklist is based on an original idea by Tom Lambert and draws on the ideas of a number of researchers of school culture such as Hedley Beare, Brian J. Caldwell, and Ross Millikan; Michael Fullan and A. Hargreaves; P. Dalin and H.G. Rolff; and David Hopkins, Mel Ainscow, and Mel West.